

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Editorial

The 1997 Newsletter Award

The judges, Dr. Joseph George and Mr. S. Sridhar, have recommended that the authors of the following three articles may share the award :-

- Birding on Treks around Nainital, by Ameen Ahmed, in issue No. 3, May/June 1997.
- Birding in Kotagiri, by Praveen J, in Issue No. 4, July/August 1997.
- Wetland near Srinagar Town needs Protection, by Khursheed Ahmad, in Issue No. 6, Nov./Dec 1997.

In recommending these awards the conservation angle of the articles has been taken into account.

The cheques have been sent to the recipients.

How Many Newsletters

Is it always true the more the merrier? The answer depends on circumstances. Looking over recent issues of several Newsletters - Blackbuck, Hornbill, Pitta, Journal of the BNHS (Miscellaneous Note Section), and our Newsletter, it seems that many of the articles published in one could well have found a place in one of the others. So, many contributors have the chance to see their pieces in print fairly soon - always satisfying to the author. And now that there is a growing interest in birdwatching and nature conservation, these publications are a response to consumer demand. However, publications which focus on the birds of a particular locality are of special interest to the local bird watcher for he is stimulated by reading about birds which are around him. In a way this happens, as Pittie focuses on Andhra Pradesh and Blackbuck on Tamil Nadu.

I frequently state that the central theme of our Newsletter should be the enjoyment of birds, and I hope that in the coming year we will receive many pieces which will delight the reader. The enjoyment of any subject automatically increases with increasing knowledge and since many of our contributors are

now well informed. We can expect to be educated and entertained. At the same time. There is still a tendency to be repetitive and write carelessly. Winston Churchill sometimes wrote his speeches ten times over. We might at least look over our writing once, carefully, substituting inappropriate words with a better choice. A dictionary at the elbow is a great help.

Note Taking

My failure to keep notes of my sightings over the years has been a serious loss - not to the world but to me. In an article in Blackbuck, K.K. Neelakantan wrote "The 6000 odd pages which I have covered with notes during the past 17 years will not convey any sense to you... but to me it evokes a wonderful memory ... The pages of my diary is like an album of photographs. As I turn the pages they bring to mind such a multitude of interesting incidents that selection seems to be quite impossible." He gives an example of a typical entry: "20 Jun '44 - 16.30 ... A flock of blossomheaded parakeets on lantana - 3 males near Grebe Tank". What memory does this note evoke? "A small flock of these birds framed against a bush of lantana in full bloom with a background of emerald paddy fields is an unforgettable sight. The reference to Grebe Tank conjures up a vision of that pocket submarine of the bird world, the little grebe." Unfortunately, many "unforgettable" memories have vanished from my mind because I have no notes about them. Stewart Melliush was another noteworthy note taker. He also made beautiful sketches of the birds and the surroundings. In a long afternoon walk with him in Madras he made sketches of harriers floating in the air so accurately that they were a help in identification with the reference books at home. With harriers the variation in colour between the females of different species is most confusing.

House Martins

L.A. Hill's letter in the correspondence column shows what a hardworking lot bird ringers are; and they are the ones who manage to acquire incontrovertible facts about bird life - migration routes, longevity, faithfulness to traditional nesting sites, family associations and other aspects which are not possible to obtain otherwise. In the paper to which Hill refers he says "It is curious that although House martins are common, widespread and universally well known throughout their breeding range due to this commensal relationship with man, they remain birds of mystery (Hill 1995). Even in their breeding range it is not yet settled where they roost when not in their nests". Cramp (1988) states "aerial roosting not proven but thought to occur during breeding season." House martins from Europe winter as far South as Africa but do not come to India. But we have the same sub-species of *Delichon urbica* here which breed in Ladakh and spread out over the sub-continent in winter. We must keep our eyes open (at night!) to see whether they sleep in the sky. I see from the New Dictionary of Birds by Sir Landsborough Thomson that "the house martin (*Delichon urbica*) has a Palearctic range and its congeners are found in southern Asia. These birds are leathery to the toes and have much white and no chestnut in their plumage.

The leathers up to the toes are a problem for ringers because the rings are often not seen.

Good Writing

Apropos what I said above in connection with good writing, I think a fine example is Salim Ali's piece "Stepping by the Woods on a Sunday Morning" which was reproduced in Blackbuck, Vol. 12, No. 4, of 1996 - Salim Ali Centenary Issue. I cannot find a better example of the kind of writing which contributors to our Newsletter should aim at. I reproduce it in this issue.

The Ornithological Society of India

On 1st September this year I wrote to Dr. Mrs. Asha Chandola Saklani, the Secretary General as follows: "I must apologise for being a rather ineffectual President, and I would now request you to call a meeting of the Executive Committee and appoint a new President. This must be done before the 30th September. I will be happy to remain on the Executive Committee if you wish, so that I am kept informed about OSI activities and can report this information suitably in the NLBW"

I have had no reply and I can only hope that I will get one before too long, so that I can report back to our readers.

Project Haircrested Drongo [NLBW 37 (3) 48]

All sightings of this bird may please be sent to Aasheesh Pittie, 8-2-545, "Prem Parvat", Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034. In this connection see the article by M.K. Himmatsinhji and the note by D. Avinandan of Rishi Valley in this issue.

Headings and subject matter

Careful readers of our newspapers must find that the bold headings often give a misleading impression about the subject matter of the article. The personal prejudices of the reporter obviously come into play. But in a publication like ours, we have to select the heading carefully so that people like Asad Rahmani and Aasheesh Pittie who feed information into their computers are not misled about the species and locations involved. In fact now there is going to be increasing difficulty because of changes in nomenclature. Some writers stick to the names in the Handbook of Salim Ali and Ripley, while others have switched over to Sibley & Monroe, and to the list published by Aasheesh Pittie and Andrew Robertson. Perhaps in course of time things will straighten out, but for the moment there will be a mix of the old and the new, and the advantage will be that readers may be induced to look at the reference book to clear up the doubts they may have about the identity of the bird in question.

Conserving Woodlots

In the Editorial of the July/August issue, I had suggested that small wooded areas which are of ecological significance should be identified, and the authorities informed about their importance so that future development could take this fact into account and some of them would be preserved. I was glad to

receive a letter from Mr Vishnudas from the Wayanad Dist, of Kerala about his willingness to help. I am in correspondence with him and if he makes any headway I will report about the manner in which he is proceeding so that others can follow suit.

Meanwhile we must congratulate PITTA (No. 78 of Oct'97) for the Memorandum they have submitted to the Vice Chairman of the Hyderabad Urban Development Authority about preserving a unique area "abutting a large body of open water (Hussain Sagar) in the Center of the city." Apparently the large concentrations of Shovellers (*Anas clypeata*) and pintail (*A. acuta*) in the middle of an urban area is a rare sight. The attempt of the Authority to develop this area into a "Beautiful Garden" may make it less beautiful than it actually is today.

Global Warming & Birds

The rising temperature of our Planet is causing concern to all thinking people. Wetlands International No. 3 of June 1997 discusses its effect on migratory birds "Climate change threatens migratory birds" adapted from an article by Adam Markham, WWF-International.

According to a recent report issued by WWF, global warming is beginning to significantly disrupt three critical factors for the success of annual bird migrations - sea levels, the timing of the seasons, and the availability of food along the migratory route.

Bird migration superbly demonstrates the complexity and the wonder of the web of life. The evolution of individual migratory strategies of different bird species makes these birds very sensitive to the impact of human activity. Long distance migrants may be in the air for many hours at a time, and travel

hundreds or even thousands of kilometres without stopping. If birds don't have access to food sources at staging points along their routes, they are not able to complete their migrations.

Some coastal sites, such as the Chesapeake Bay in the US, and Mai Po Marshes in Hong Kong, are such important refuelling stops for migratory bird species, that any threat could put millions of birds at risk. If any of these so-called "critical" sites are lost or altered, the whole balance of the migratory process can be disrupted.

Threats posed to birds by climate changes are :

Habitat loss, with studies showing that predicted rises in sea levels could wipe out some of the world's most important bird habitats.

Changes in the start of seasons, causing birds to leave one area too early to hit feeding grounds at optimal times in other areas along their migratory routes. For example, the Red Knots and Ruddy Turnstones in the US might fly south before millions of Horseshoe crabs emerge to provide the eggs the birds need for food to survive the journey.

Drier weather, which will affect the availability of wetlands in many areas.

Although the biggest current threat to migratory birds is loss of habitat through human activity, a new threat in the form of climate change is on the horizon. Global warming could undoubtedly disrupt the migration cycle of many bird species by destabilising traditional weather patterns and the availability of food sites and food resources for birds to complete their migratory cycles. For some, it could affect their chances for survival on every leg of their migratory journey - at the breeding grounds, at the wintering grounds, and the stops in between.



Birds of Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary - Kerala

C. SUSANTHKUMAR, Coordinator, Warblers & Waders (A group of birdwatchers and nature lovers,) Prakrithi, Indiranagar, Perookada P.O., Thiruvananthapuram 695 005, Kerala

Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary, which includes forests ranging from moist deciduous to tropical evergreen is spread over an area of 100 square kilometres of undulating terrain in the Kollam District of Kerala. Four rivers Umayar, Aruviyar, Shendurneyar and Parappayar wind their way through the forests. There are a number of settlements in this area, including tribals. Owing to human activities, there is the usual degradation but also diversity of habitats. (e.g. Tea & Rubber estates, teak and palm plantations, agricultural fields, reservoirs). Cattle grazing and teak monoculture are naturally affecting the quality of the sanctuary. Most of the area (about 25 km. long and 10 km. broad) is hilly and interspersed with ravines. Lion-tailed macaque, bonnet macaque, Nilgiri langur, barking deer, mouse deer, sambar, wild boar, gaur, Malabar giant squirrel, Malabar giant flying squirrel, Indian mongoose,

civet, slender loris, blacknaped hare, jackal, leopard cat, sloth bear and tiger are some important mammals found in the sanctuary.

Warblers and Waders (a group of Birdwatchers and Nature lovers), Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala), organised a five day camp at Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary from 10 to 14, February 1996. The survey team camped at four different locations Kattilappara, Rockwood, Kallar and Pandimotta, and the campers' report follows.

Kattilappara

Kattilappara is at the entrance of the Sanctuary. The vegetation here includes moist deciduous forest, semi-evergreen forest (along stream beds and in the higher reaches), teak plantations and degraded forest patches near

the reservoir. In the reservoir Oriental darter *Anhinga melanogaster* and river tern *Sterna aurantia* were regularly observed. Hunting parties of grey tit *Parus major*, gold fronted chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*, blackheaded oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*, golden oriole *Oriolus oriolus*, blacknaped oriole *Oriolus chinensis*, bronze drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*, rackettailed drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*, large billed leaf warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*, tairy bluebird *Irena puella*, orange minivet *Pericrocotus flammeus* and Malabar trogon *Herpactes fasciatus* were always active and gave us much pleasure.

On February 13, 1996, we trekked from Kallar to Kattilappara, and we saw a bird of prey, sitting majestically on the branch of a tree near the forest path. This was in a dense evergreen forest near Vilakkumaram. It was a medium sized eagle, with a crested head, buffy white throat and breast, a black mesial streak, and brownish upperparts. That unusual raptor was a female Legge's baza *Aviceda jerdoni*, the rarest bird of prey found in Kerala. According to Salim Ali's 'Birds of Kerala' - it is reckoned as very rare. There is a single specimen in the British Museum, collected from Wayanad, in 1877, but no further information is available as regards its occurrence. On the same day, a laggar falcon *Falco jugger*, another rare raptor, was also recorded at Kattilappara.

Kallar

Situated 15 kilometres from Kattilappara, the natural habitat of Kallar is increasingly under threat from agricultural land use in the hills, and cultivation of tea, rubber, pepper and cloves. The narrow belts of moist deciduous and semi evergreen forests spreading along the stream beds are also vanishing. The forest resthouse in Kallar is almost in an urban setting.

At the time of our visit, the coral tree *Erythrina indica* was flowering. Racket-tailed drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*, ashy drongo *Dicrurus leucophaeus*, greyheaded myna *Sturnus malabaricus*, gold fronted chloropsis *Chloropsis aurifrons*, Lorikeet *Loriculus vernalis*, blossom-headed parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala* and orioles, visited the tree for nectar. The reed thicket around the resthouse was the roosting place of Blyth's reed warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum*, thickbilled warbler *Acrocephalus aedon* and red-whiskered bulbul *Pyononotus jocosus*. An Indian pitta *Pitta brachyura* was found feeding in front of the resthouse early morning every day. The long melodious whistling of the Malabar whistling thrush *Myiophonus horsfieldii* was heard before sunrise and sunset every day. The rubber estate near the resthouse was a favoured place for cuckoos. One afternoon we heard a loud call of the great Indian pied hornbill *Buceros bicornis* from the evergreen forest in front of the resthouse.

Rockwood

Rockwood is situated 8 km. from Kallar. The habitat includes semi deciduous forest, moist evergreen, tea and

rubber estates and oil palm plantations. On February 10, 1996 we camped near a stream in moist evergreen forest. Groups of noisy white bellied treepies *Dendrocitta leucogastra*, Malabar grey hornbills *Ocyrceros griseus* and Rubythroated bulbuls *Pyononotus melanicterus* were the attractive species of the canopy. The next morning a large flock of Malabar grey hornbills (35 to 40 birds) was observed.

On February 11th we trekked from Rockwood to Pandimotta. This route was mainly through evergreen forest. Large evergreen trees with buttressed boles were dominant, the undergrowth consists of reeds along with muffles and ferns. This area was extremely rich in birdlife and butterflies. Some rare butterflies red helen *Papilio helenus*, Malabar rose *Tros jophon*, Malabar crow *Papilio dravidarum*, Buddha peacock *Papilio buddha*, tree nymph *Hestia lynceus*, blue oakleaf *Kallima philarchus* and map butterfly *Cyrestis lhyodamas* were observed. A mixed group of common crow *Euploea core*, common mime *Chilasa clytia* and dark blue tiger *Danais melissa* (5001) were seen fluttering over a flowering tree. It was a marvellous sight.

When we entered the evergreen forest a group of about 10 Wyanad laughing thrushes *Garrulax delesserti* were actively hopping about on the reeds. Noisy flocks of bluewinged parakeets, blossom-headed parakeets and hill mynas were also seen. The other birds spotted in this evergreen forest were black woodpecker *Dryocopus javensis*, greyheaded bulbul *Pyononotus priocephalus*, shama *Copsychus malabaricus*, little spider hunter *Arachnothera longirostris*, spotted babbler *Pellorneum ruficeps*, Jerdon's imperial pigeon *Ducula badia*, emerald dove *Chalcophaps indica*, crow pheasant *Gentropus sinensis* and grey jungle fowl *Gallus sonneratii*.

On our return trip from Rockwood, we heard the thrilling call of the great Indian pied hornbill *Buceros bicornis* from the evergreen forest of the opposite hill, and the sound echoed from the valley. We waited for our "Chief guest", and we were not disappointed. After a short interval two birds appeared on the top of a tall tree stretching their necks and heads in their usual manner. The yellow beaks were sparkling in the sunlight. The birds were in their breeding plumage, and it was a memorable sight.

Pandimotta

Characteristic of the tropical mountain evergreen rain forest, the vegetation was stunted with moss and lichen covered trunks and lots of orchids. Some of the commonest trees found were ironwood *Mesua nagassarum*, wild Durian *Cullenia exarillata*, Rudrak *Elaeocarpus tuberculatus*, black plum tree *Syzygium cumini* and chenkurinji *Gluta travancorica*. Pandimotta is tough and tiring, a climb of over 1499 m. But compared to other areas of the Sanctuary, it is a lovely area with original shola forests. In Pandimotta because of the dense canopy one usually hears, not see the birds.

The time spent in the wilderness of Pandimotta was unforgettable. The musical call of the white-breasted laughing thrushes *Garrulax fairbanki* in early morning, reverberated in the reed thickets. The grey-headed flycatcher *Culicicapa ceylonensis* is common here. A rare pigeon, endemic to the Western Ghats, the Nilgiri woodpigeon *Columba elphinstonii* was seen here. The noteworthy bird species of the Pandimotta region are : black eagle *Ictinaetus malayensis*, Indian kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, blackwinged kite *Elanus caeruleus*, Nilgiri thrush *Zoothera dauma*, blueheaded rock thrush *Monticola cinclorhynchus*, white eye *Zosterops palpebrosa*, scimitar babbler *Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*, rufous babbler *Turdoides subrufus*, black bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*, blackbird *Turdus merula*, Bourdillon's blackbird *Turdus merula bourdilloni*, green imperial pigeon *Ducula aenea* and booted warbler *Hippolais caligata*.

At 10.30 a.m. we spotted the carcass of a gaur, lying across the trail. It was a full grown bull, and death might have occurred by the fighting of two bulls. The trek path from Thenkinthoppu to Pandimotta is an ideal place for reptiles. The prominent reptiles we found in this area were : green pit viper *Trimeresurus gramineus*, hump-nosed pit viper *Hypnale hypnale*, Malabar pit viper *Trimeresurus malabaricus*, common pit viper *Trimeresurus macrolepsis*, brown tree snake *Dryophis pulverulentus*, green whipsnake *Dryophis nasutus* and cat snake *Boiga trigonata*.

The present checklist of birds is primarily based on our second survey in 1996 and with a few additions in 1997 during the third survey. In all 204 species representing 44 families are listed. The avifauna of Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary is very rich and interesting. The present work is only a preliminary survey. Further studies may result in additions to the present list.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Sri P.K. Ravindran for his participation in the bird survey. I am also thankful to members of Warblers and Waders for their field support and encouragement. I am also grateful to Sri P. Chandrababu Panicker, Assistant Wildlife Warden, Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary for providing facilities for this survey.

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Keralathile Pakshikal - Prof. K.K. Neelakantan
Snakes of Kerala - Dr. K.G. Adiyodi
Butterflies of the Indian Region - M.A. Wynter Blyth
A Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan - Sidney Dillon Ripley II

Editor's note

For lack of space only the list of birds of prey and woodpeckers is reproduced. Anyone needing the full list can ask for a copy from Navbharath Press. Rs. 20 should be sent to cover xeroxing and postage.

Checklist of Birds of Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary

No.	Common name	Scientific name
Family : Picidae		
01	Speckled piculet	<i>Picumnus innominatus</i>
02	Pigmy woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos nanus</i>
03	Yellow fronted pied woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i>
04	Rufous woodpecker	<i>Celeus brachyurus</i>
05	Indian great black woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus javensis</i>
06	Small yellownaped woodpecker	<i>Picus chlorolophus</i>
07	Little scalybellied woodpecker	<i>Picus xanthopygaeus</i>
08	Indian goldenbacked throated woodpecker	<i>Dinopium javanense</i>
09	Lesser goldenbacked woodpecker	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>
10	Larger goldenbacked woodpecker	<i>Chrysocolaptes lucidus</i>
11	Heartspotted woodpecker	<i>Hemicircus canente</i>
Family : Acciptridae		
12	Legge's baza	<i>Aviceda jerdoni</i>
13	Indian blackcrested baza (?)	<i>Aviceda leuphotes</i>
14	Honey buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>
15	Blackwinged kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
16	Brahminy kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>
17	Greyheaded fishing eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus</i>
18	Crested serpent eagle	<i>Spilornis cheela</i>
19	Crested goshawk	<i>Accipiter trivirgatus</i>
20	Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>
21	Black eagle	<i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i>
22	Booted eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>
23	Rufousbellied eagle	<i>Hieraaetus kienerii</i>
24	Crested hawk eagle	<i>Spizaetus cirrhatus</i>
Family : Falconidae		
25	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
26	Lesser kestrel (?)	<i>Falco naumanni</i>
27	Laggar falcon	<i>Falco jugger</i>





Aasheesh Pittie's comments on the Haircrested Drongo - *Dicurus hottentottus* - in the correspondence section of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers Vol. 37 No. 3 of May/June 1997 has prompted me to type this account of my meeting with this species in Kutch. Normally there is no scope for personal feelings or sentiments where it concerns the science of Ornithology, or any other branch of science, but in this case this particular bird was instrumental in establishing my credibility as a birdwatcher whose identification of birds could be relied upon. I have perhaps related this episode before in the pages of the Newsletter; however it bears repetition for no other reason but to prove my view that one should not be dogmatic about bird behaviour or occurrences.

Shivarajkumar Khachar and Lavkumar came to Kutch in the mid-1950s and stayed as my guests. One day while talking about bird occurrences in Kutch, Lavkumar wished to see my bird notes, so I quite modestly read out my notes laying stress on the species that were recorded for the first time in this area. Lavkumar thought it would be worth publishing my notes in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society, whereupon I told him to go ahead with it. In due course the notes appeared in the Journal in which the occurrence of the haircrested drongo was mentioned. I suppose many expert eyebrows must have been raised on reading about this species being seen in Kutch, but one well-known authority on birds was quite peeved over this and even reprimanded Lavkumar for relying on someone else for the identification of a bird which was impossible to be met with in an area like Kutch. Some time later when this expert visited the B.N.H.S. he repeated his doubt to Mr. Humayun Abdulali saying it was a fantastic claim of Himmatsinhji to have seen the haircrested drongo in Kutch. However as my good luck would have it, this drongo once again visited the plantation of Vijay Vilas Palace (about 8 km west of Mandvi Port). I collected a specimen and sent it to the B.N.H.S. where it reached soon after the above remarks were made to Mr. Abdulali!

Coming back to the suggestion of Aasheesh Pittie it would be useful to have information from birdwatchers about the distribution of the haircrested drongo. But before I proceed further with this matter it would not be out of place to describe this bird for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the species.

The haircrested or spangled drongo is perhaps slightly larger than the myna being dark bluish-black in colour which, when in good plumage, has an iridescent gloss and spangling, more close around the head and upper neck. The crest is composed of a few fine hair-like feathers which extend from the forehead to the back of the crown. The long squarish tail has the ends of the outer feathers curled inwards versus outwards as a deep fork in some of the outer feathers of the other drongos. The last two features of this bird are together diagnostic. It utters a somewhat musical call which more often than not first attracts ones attention towards this bird.

Notes - Haircrested Drongo

M.K. HIMMATSINHJI, Jubilee Ground, Bhuj, Kutch

The main diet of this drongo is flower nectar though to some extent it devours insects also. It generally moves about according to the availability of its food. According to the Handbook (Ali & Ripley, Vol.5, 1972) this species has rather a wide distribution from the Himalayan foothills and submontane tract eastwards through northern U.P., Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, other easternmost states and Bangladesh. It is met with in eastern Bihar, Eastern Ghats complex of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh (Bastar and Balaghat dists.), Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Western Karnatak (Malnad), Kerala and northward along the W. Ghats atleast to Mumbai (Bombay) straggling irregularly to Kutch.

From the above distributional information about the haircrested drongo it would be deduced that the birds that travel up the Western Ghats make irregular appearance in Kutch. However it seems strange that upto the time I met with this nectar-eating species in Kutch, so far as I am aware, even afterwards, it had not been recorded either in the decidedly better wooded areas of South Gujarat or in Saurashtra. Did they travel nonstop up the western coast of the Indian Peninsula straight from the Western Ghats? Thus it is likely that they were either missed by birdwatchers in the other areas of Gujarat or they came down from elsewhere. The only other location could possibly be the foothills or the submontane region of the Karakoram range in Pakistan situated almost directly north of Kutch. Dr Roberts' observation (The Birds of Pakistan, Vol.2, O.U.P., 1992) nullifies this assumption. According to him there being no evidence of this species' existence in Pakistan he has excluded it from the checklist of birds of that country. On the other hand going back into the period of E.C. Stuart Baker (The Fauna of British India, Birds, Series Vol.II) gives the distribution of the haircrested drongo in the northern part of the subcontinent as extending from Murree to Eastern Assam. Stuart Baker must surely have had reliable information on this subject at that time over 70 years ago, for his Fauna series of eight volumes were published from the year 1922 onwards.

Stuart Baker as also Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley mention the breeding period of this species as April to June in north India and from about March-April in the south. The haircrested drongo that used to come to Kutch generally made their appearance in December-January and used to depart from the garden of Vijay Vilas Palace (Mandvi) in February. But that by itself does not solve the conundrum as to whether they came from the north or south. It would be interesting to know if any of the readers of the Newsletter have come across this species anywhere along the westernmost portions of this country between Mumbai and Kutch during the last two or three decades; for I have not noted it since 1966. I may also mention here that most of the passerine winter visitors resident in the Indian subcontinent who come from the north to this region start their return journeys from the month of February onwards through March.

As far as my observations are concerned, I first recorded the haircrested drongo in January/February 1948. The birds I observed were mostly seen feeding from the flowers of the Bottle Brush — *Callistemon lanceolatus*. At times they would even hang upside down while feeding. The rainfall in Kutch was meagre in 1972 and for the next two years there was complete drought owing to which the water levels in the plantation of Vijay Vilas went down. In trying to deepen the wells saline water from the Arabian sea started seeping into

them. The unfortunate result was the drying up of most of the vegetation including the ornamental shrubbery in the garden. The situation upto the present time has not improved. This has left me wondering as to where my friends who used to show up go now?

The details of the occurrences of the haircrested drongo in the plantation of Vijay Vilas Palace (West of Mandvi, Kutch. c 22° 50'N) are given hereunder.

Date Month and year	No. of birds seen	Remarks
Jan/Feb 1948	1	Date not recorded
29 Dec 1956	2	One specimen collected for BNHS
25 Dec 1958	1	— Perhaps same bird
30 Jan 1959	1	
24 Dec 1962	3	All more or less kept together
27 Dec 1963	1	Perhaps same bird, saw one on 10 Jan
25 Jan 1964	2	
06 Jan 1965	1	—
30 Dec 1965	2	Perhaps same group, one may have been missed in December
01 Jan 1966	3	
11 Dec 1966	1	
		Not seen thereafter



Display Behaviour in Woodpeckers

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I was pleased to see the May-June 1997 issue of the *Newsletter* especially the two notes on p.49 on woodpeckers. Mrs Pragati Nayak's observations on the interactions between mynas and woodpeckers was interesting but it would have been more useful if there was a mention of the species involved. There is a great demand for holes excavated by woodpeckers and barbets especially fresh ones from secondary cavity nesters as these are relatively clean and free from parasites. Woodpeckers themselves compete among one another for suitable cavity sites and often larger and aggressive species usurp nest holes of the smaller species. Lester Short in his most interesting paper "Burdens of the picid hole excavating habit" published in the *Wilson Bulletin* in 1979 (91: 16-28) has extensively dealt with this problem and has discussed the various strategies adopted by woodpeckers to avoid losing their nest-holes to others.

Dr Barooah's observation the "dance" of the Lesser goldenbacked woodpecker was also interesting. Even *Woodpeckers of the World* by Lester L. Short (1982) admits that very little is known about the displays of this common woodpecker and only shows how much more work remains to be done to get an idea of the life history and biology of Indian birds. I have a comment on his statement that "the dance could not be a breeding display as the time was quite distant from

the birds' nesting period". His observation was on 2.11.1997 (sic). Woodpeckers, in general, maintain pair-bonds throughout the year. Pair formation activities are very difficult to distinguish from normal aggressive interactions, according to Lester Short. Another point to be noted is that though breeding season is defined as February-July for this species, nest excavation takes place a month or more before egg-laying and so pair formation may take place even earlier.

During the course of my study on the ecology of eight species of woodpeckers in the moist deciduous forest habitat of the Peechi-Vazhani Wildlife Sanctuary (Trichur district of Kerala), I came across displays of the rufous woodpecker (*Celeus brachyurus*) and the lesser yellownaped woodpecker (*Picus chlorolophus*) which I report below.

On 29 September 1991, I was attracted by the loud "keenk-keenk-keenk" calls of the rufous woodpeckers around 0715 hrs. There were two birds calling from different trees. Even as I approached the nearest tree *Alstonia scholaris*, a rufous woodpecker flew in and landed within a foot from a bird already occupying it. This was followed by the "keenk-keenk-keenk" calls and a low "kik-kik, kik-kik" calls. Both birds were facing each other and every few seconds they

were engaged in swaying of their head and tail. The neck was held stiff and beak pointed above as they moved their head and tail covering 45°, like a clockwork toy.

The swaying was done simultaneously and one of the two birds appeared to engage in the act more vigorously. After 2-3 minutes both the birds flew at each other and landed on a lower branch, within about 6 inches of each other and continued their display. They swayed their heads continuously 18-20 times at a stretch, followed by a short pause of a few seconds. All the time they gave the low "kik-kik" calls. The short pause was broken when one of the birds began to display and this triggered off similar movements in the other bird. The swaying was synchronised so their head and tail moved with the same speed. This continued for about 5 minutes with the display slowly tapering off.

Then one of the birds changed its perch and landed on a vertical branch followed by the second bird which landed a foot away. The display continued but in shorter bursts and was not as vigorous as before. The birds were now facing the same direction. Soon they became silent and inactive and were just clinging to the branch without any activity. They remained on this perch for over 10 minutes after which one of the birds flew to a nearby tree. The second bird took off after 2-3 minutes and flew in the opposite direction and called. I could not determine the sexes of the birds as the light was poor.

I observed the display behaviour of the lesser yellownaped woodpeckers on two occasions. On 1 March 1992, I noticed a pair on a roadside tree, around 0745 hrs. A third bird (a female) was on a nearby tree but never took part in the activities. The two birds were seen perched very close to one another and were swaying their head from side to side. Every few minutes they kept pecking at each other's beak for a few seconds. This

continued for 15-20 minutes. In two or three instances, the displaying birds were seen launching in the air at each other and landing on the ground with their feet almost clasped. They kept changing perches frequently during the period of observation. Around 0805, the female involved in the display flew away and the male bird joined the other female and called.

In the second instance, on 15 March 1993, I located two birds (sexes not distinguished) displaying near a recently vacated nest. They kept swaying their head accompanied by a low "wick-wick" call. They kept flying (in short bursts) lower and lower down the tree trunk, displaying their backs to one another. One of the birds was heard calling a series of louder "wick-wick-wick-wick" calls and later resorted to the regular "cheenk" calls. A bird displayed its back-and-white-wing pattern (usually seen in flight). At this point I had to leave the spot to continue the bird transect I had been doing.

Rufous woodpeckers feeding on *Oecophylla* ants

On 21 February 1993, I located a pair of rufous woodpecker (*Celeus brachyurus*) on a *Xylia xylocarpa* tree having a few nests of the fierce red tailor ant (*Oecophylla* sp.). The birds were seen perched close to one of the nests and were feeding on the ants. The more active bird of the pair was seen pecking at ants as they moved towards it but preventing them from coming too close by making slight movements. Later, it was found picking ants from the periphery of the nest. In three minutes it pecked 100 times. The birds were observed foraging for over 30 minutes on the same tree and in this period they could have consumed several hundred ants. In the *Handbook* there is a mention that a specimen of the rufous woodpecker examined had 2600 individuals of the ant *Crematogaster subnuda* in its stomach. There is no specific mention of *Oecophylla* sp. in the diet of the rufous woodpecker, though it is reported to eat several species of ants and termites.



Occurrence of the White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* in Assam with some Notes on its Identification

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While looking through a previous issue of the Newsletter, I happened to read an article [Vol.36(1), 66-68] on the occurrence of the Oriental white stork *Ciconia boyciana* in West Bengal. The description of the birds in the article mentions that the birds had *black tails*. I would like to point out that the black tail is a key identification feature of the Asian openbill *Anastomus oscitans* and not the Oriental white stork.

Therefore, in this article, I emphasize the identification of three confusingly similar species, namely, Oriental white stork *Ciconia boyciana*, white stork *Ciconia ciconia* and the Asian openbill *Anastomus oscitans*, which bear white plumage, black scapulars and flight feathers, in order to help other birdwatchers to identify these species in the field. Along with this, recent records of the white stork *Ciconia ciconia* in Assam is also presented.

Introduction

The white stork *Ciconia ciconia* is a winter visitor to the Indian Sub-continent, ranging from West Pakistan, north-western India, south through the Deccan, Nepal, Gangetic plain, and decreasingly through to West Bengal and Bangladesh, where its range overlaps with that of the similar Oriental white stork *Ciconia boyciana*.

Identification

Three species of Indian storks that share white plumage and black flight feathers and scapulars — white stork *Ciconia ciconia*, Oriental white stork *Ciconia boyciana* and Asian openbill *Anastomus oscitans* — are found in north-east India. They can be separated by the colour of the bill and tail.

White stork *Ciconia ciconia* — Length 106 cm

All white except for scapulars, primaries and secondaries which are black. Heavy, sharply pointed bill and legs, bright red (may look darker in poor light). Lores and iris *dark brown*, tail white.

Juvenile birds are similar to adults, but black feathers tinged brown and bill blackish brown.

Oriental white stork *Ciconia boyciana* — Length 112 cm

Like the adult white stork, but with *heavier bill blackish-grey* and upperwing outer webs of secondaries and inner primaries irregularly *whitish-grey*. Separated from juvenile white storks and Asian openbills by grey-red orbital ring and red lores (*contra* dark coloured). Breeding birds have a blue iris.

Asian Openbill *Anastomus oscitans* — Length 81 cm

Smaller than both the aforementioned species. Body white, but usually appears to be quite dirty white. Blackish brown bill (sometimes looks reddish in poor light) with arching mandibles diagnostic. In non-breeding plumage, white underparts replaced by smoky-grey. Juvenile birds similar to adult in non-breeding plumage, but darker smoky brown-grey with blackish brown mantle.

Separated from both *C. ciconia* and *C. boyciana* in all stages by *black tail* (*contra* white).

Status in Assam

There are very few recent records of the white or the Oriental white stork from Assam. According to Ali & Ripley (1983) the records of white stork from Assam probably relate to the Oriental white stork (*Ciconia ciconia boyciana* in Ali & Ripley, 1983). However both have been listed as 'uncommon winter visitors' by Choudhury (1990).

There are four (and one unconfirmed) recent records of the white stork in Assam. Out of these, three (and one unconfirmed) are from Kaziranga National park. The fourth being from Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary (Talukdar *et al.*, 1995). The Oriental white stork, which is listed as globally threatened (Collar, N.J., Crosby, M.J. and Statterfield, A.J. (1994) *Birds to Watch 2: The world list of threatened birds*), is very rare in Assam, with only one recent record of a single bird

in a paddyfield in Sibsagar district (P.C. Bhattacharjee *verbally*, 1994).

The records from Kaziranga are given below :

- 01 One bird seen in a paddyfield just outside the park near Kohora in 1984 (Anwaruddin Choudhury *pers. comm.*).
- 02 One bird seen in Borbeel (Baguri) during February 1993. (P. Sharma *pers. comm.*).
- 03 A single bird was seen engaged in solitary fishing in the Mori Diphalu river (Kohora) on 13 January 1994.
- 04 One bird with a yellowish-orange bill was seen among a few Asian openbills in Sahabduba Beel (Baguri) on 27 December 1993. However this record remains unconfirmed as the colour of the tail could not be seen.

Conclusion

Although, the white stork is often overlooked, it is nowhere common in Assam. Confusion with the Asian openbill is another problem. Birdwatchers must keep a lookout for both these species, especially the Oriental white stork, since very little is known about the status of this bird in its wintering grounds in the Indian sub-continent.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Dr Anwaruddin Choudhury, P.C. Bhattacharjee and Dhananjay Katju for all their help. I am indebted to Mr Pankaj Sharma who read through this article and gave some valuable comments. I would also like to thank Mr Aashish Chandola for the use of his computer.

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Notes on Redbreasted Falconet (*Microhierax caerulescens*) Observed at Kokrajhar District and Adjacent Area, Assam

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On the morning of 24th February 1992 in a hill forest adjacent to Siljan village, 9 km away from Kokrajhar (Latitude

26° 27'N Longitude 90° 15' E), we heard a shrill whistling *se-e-e se-e-e* call. Surprisingly we found a small bulbul size

bird producing the call from the top of a dead tree at the foot of the Kakrikhola hill. We identified the bird as a redbreasted falconet (*Microhierax caerulescens*).

According to Salim Ali's Handbook, there are two species of falconet found in India. One is the Himalayan redbreasted falconet (*Microhierax caerulescens*) and the other is the whitelegged falconet or pied pigmy falcon (*Microhierax melanoleucos*). The distribution of both these birds in Assam is from Himalayan foothills and extend up to Cachar, but the birds are not common in Assam.

We have recorded their behaviour from our several sightings, which are given below :—

- 1 On 24th February 1992 in our first sighting, we observed that, while calling a single bird perched on the top of a dead tree attracted another one which came and perched close to it. After a while both birds started to rub their beaks with each other cheerfully. One was preening the other for a little while. Probably this is their courtship behaviour, which I (Dey) came to know from the local Gado villager who was our guide. We also learnt that this bird nests during March-April.
- 2 On 30th January 1995 during a Nature Orientation Camp at Kakrikhola Hillforest (recently declared as Chakrashilla

WL Sanctuary), at about 9 am, we found a party of 5 redbreasted falconets perched on a leafshaded tree just 15 to 20 feet above the ground. The birds were very busy foraging. Among the party four birds were perched on a single horizontal branch and two were flying and catching winged insects. One bird caught an insect in midair and came back to its perch. The bird held the insect in its right talon and tore the wings and then consumed the whole mass. The wings of the insect which we collected was found to be of a butterfly.

- 3 On 24th July 1995 at a foothill forest village Ghumari Ghat, we observed a solitary redbreasted falconet perched on the top of a dead tree. The bird was bobbing its head and swinging its tail. Suddenly it flew down into a lantana bush with great speed and caught a large green coloured grasshopper. This happened within 4 to 5 feet distance from us, while we were hiding behind a bush. After catching the insect it cut-off the wings and legs and swallowed the remaining mass. Before swallowing, the bird was shaking the insect and later on we found many types of insect wings at the base of the tree.

Though we have sighted the bird only a few times, yet it can be seen throughout the year in some areas of our district.

Sighting Records at a glance

Date	Location	No. of birds sighted	Habitat	Remarks
24.02.92	Siljan FV	2	Foothill forest	Perched on the top of a dead tree
04.07.92	Kakrikhola FV	1		A juvenile bird was captured by a Gade villager from Kakrikhola forest
28.01.95	Pundibari FV	1	Forest village	Perched on the top of a roadside tree
30.01.95	Kakrikhola FV	5	Hill forest	Perched on a leaf shaded tree
23.07.95	Dabergaon FV	3	Hill forest	Perched on a large tree at the extreme top of a hillock
24.07.95	Ghumarighat FV	1	Open cultivated land	Perched on a tree at the edge of the crop field

FV - Forest village

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Nest of the Indian Great Horned Owl, *Bubo bubo*, Sighted on Nrupatunga Betta of Hubli

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Touching the two housing colonies on the eastern outskirts of Hubli town, Ashoknagar and Adarshnagar, an ancient bush-covered tall clay-cliff stretches in a north-south direction about 200 yards in length and about 150 yards high. Formerly, this hill was known as Unakali-Gudda but, recently it has been named 'Nrupatunga Betta' and developed for recreation. This solitary clay-cliff commands a good view of Hubli town on the West and agricultural fields with black-cotton soil on the East. An asphalted road goes round and up to the hill-top which many people use regularly for their morning and evening walks.

Being permanent residents we visit the site frequently for birdwatching. A few birds like the redvented bulbul, small green bee-eater, white breasted kingfisher, grey-shrike, common babbler and the Indian roller are often seen on all sides of the hill.

On 23rd March 1997, we were trekking along the asphalted road early in the morning. We had not yet reached the first hair-pin curve of this road when, suddenly our attention was drawn by a moving object on the ledge of the 15 feet high clay wall. This wall was created by cutting earth on the right side to accommodate the asphalted road. To examine the movement, we used our 7 x 50 binocular. We were excited to see a large dark-brown bird moving its head from side to side. Crouching down in the fissure near a large stone the bird sat perfectly well covered by a *Duranta* bush. Under its large wings the bird was protecting 3 of its nestlings. In fact it was amazing to find a nest so daringly made by the bird close to a busy road. Advancing towards the nest was not difficult because the bird showed no indication of being perturbed. For a long time we watched the bird and noted down all its distinguishing features. The two large and prominent ear-tufts or 'horns' on the head, the typical orange coloured eyes which established its identity as the Indian great horned eagle-owl, *Bubo bubo*, known for its deep, 'sonorous' double hoot. Very exciting to watch was the characteristic 'diversionary' tactics used by the 3 creamy looking chicks. Often they were pushing their roundish heads out of the protecting wings of the mother. One of them which

appeared to be a little larger occasionally stood up. In this position it was easy to see its legs fully covered with feathers.

A regular watch on the brood was kept from 23rd March 1997 onwards and observations made at intervals on the growth of the nestlings. On 10 April 1997 it was noticed that the larger nestling had left the nest and was perched on the branch of a tall *Eucalyptus* tree. The tree stood facing the brood and the bird perched there could easily look on the brood with the two smaller chicks still occupying the nest with the mother. Another similarly coloured dark-brown bird was also seen visiting the site. Perhaps it was the male eagle owl. On 12 April 1997 only one chick was seen. On the 14th of April 1997 we found the nest empty.

In the Gooders Encyclopedia 1979, it is mentioned that eggs of the eagle-owl, *Bubo bubo*, breeding in Europe, Africa, Eurasia and other countries take about 34-36 days to hatch and further the nestlings take about 3-4 weeks and sometimes even 5 weeks to leave the nest. On this basis we have attempted to calculate the approximate date on which the eagle-owl breeding on Nrupatunga Betta laid its first egg. It is worked out as follows:-

At least 4 weeks are required for the fledgling to leave the nest after hatching. The 1st fledgling left the nest at Nrupatunga on 10 April 1997. That means the egg from which this fledgling first hatched was laid on 13 March 1997. Adding a minimum of 34 days for hatching to 13 March 1997, the approximate date on which the 1st egg was laid would be around 7 or 8 February 1997.

Salim Ali & Ripley (1987), say that sharing of sexes in egg incubation and the period of incubation etc. in the Indian great horned owl, *Bubo bubo* still remain unrecorded. The aggressive behaviour of the brooding hen may be one of the reasons. They however, conclude by saying that the overall breeding season in India for this bird is between November to May. But chiefly it is between February to April. Our observations almost tally with the months indicated by Salim Ali & Ripley. Birdwatchers elsewhere in the country in pursuit of such studies may verify and comment.



Wetland Near Srinagar Town Needs Protection

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On 3rd November 1996, the International Bird Counting Day, Intesar Suhail, a former student of the Centre of

Wildlife & Ornithology and myself set out to study a wetland in the vicinity of Badamibagh cantonment near Srinagar, Jammu

& Kashmir. We reached Lalchowk at 12 noon where we met Junaid, my classmate, who also accompanied us. The wetland exists nowhere in black and white in the files of the State Forest Department, and the general public too is unaware of its importance. It is 2 km east from the heart of the city. It took us ten minutes by an autorickshaw to reach Sonawar autostand from where to its left is a zigzag street up to the site occupied both sides by the newly constructed residential houses with some patches of wetland vegetation (*Saccharum* sp.). The presence of wetland vegetation suggests that the whole area was earlier a marshy wetland. This fact is now confirmed and as per first hand reports, it was once a wetland from Athawajan to Magarmalbagh around 15 sq km which was then used for the rehabilitation and setting up of an army campus now known as the Badamibagh cantonment area. The only patch now existing is round about half square kilometer which too is being filled up for construction purposes.

This small wetland surprisingly hosts a large number of waterfowl. We observed these birds from 1245 hrs to 1500 hrs. We estimated that there were 5000 ducks of the following species.

1 Common teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
2 Gadwal	<i>Anas strepera</i>
3 Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
4 Shoveller	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
5 Common pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
6 Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>

On 19th November 1996, Suhail and myself again visited the site. This time we were fortunate enough to scan the whole area taking the help of two kids, who guided us to a spot from where we observed 15 pairs of mallards called 'King' in Kashmir. We saw them actively foraging by their characteristic up-ending method. During our survey, we came across some more wetland patches beside the one we were observing. These patches had Indian moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) and coot (*Fulica atra*). In a gap of 15 days we observed an increase in the number of species but decrease in the total number of waterfowl. We were also surprised that on the 19th we did not see any wigeon (*Anas penelope*). The species of ducks and other birds observed on this day were :

1 Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i> (two pairs only)
2 Common teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>

3 Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
4 Gadwal	<i>Anas strepera</i>
5 Shoveller	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
6 Common pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
7 White-eyed pochard	<i>Aythya nyroca</i> (2 pairs only)
8 Blackeared kite	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>
9 Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
10 Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
11 Blue rock pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
12 Whitebreasted kingfisher	<i>Halycon smyrnensis</i>
13 Small blue kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
14 Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
15 House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
16 Jungle crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
17 Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
18 Whitecheeked bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus leucogenys</i>
19 Streaked laughing thrush	<i>Garrulax lineatus</i>
20 Blue whistling thrush	<i>Myiophonus caeruleus</i>
21 Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
22 House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>

We then left the site at 1430 hrs. The next day i.e. on 20th November 1996, the valley observed its first snowfall of the year.

I fear for the safety of this patch of wetland. If steps are not taken for its protection and conservation, then this natural wealth will vanish very soon. There are many new constructions going on these days and large areas of the wetland are being filled up every year. It is obvious that the existence of this large number of waterfowl is due to the fear of the army for the erstwhile hunters are not allowed to hunt here. So this is a big contribution of the armed forces towards the conservation of nature.

I am therefore of the opinion that this should be brought to the notice of the concerned Forest Department officers and Wildlife Protection Department and should be declared as protected area and it should be fenced.

I would also suggest to the Wildlife Protection Department of Jammu & Kashmir that measures should be taken for complete enactment of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1978, which is included in the State's constitution.



Avian Predators of Honey Bees and their Management

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Observations were made on the birds associated with the Indian bee (*Apis indica*) and Italian bee (*A. mellifera*) hived at the Forest College & Research Institute, Mettupalayam and with private bee keepers. The predatory potential and status

were classified as serious if 25 or more bees were devoured per day by the species, moderate if 5 to 24 bees were killed per day, and mild if less than 5 bees were preyed upon per day.

List of birds predaceous on honey bees

1	Green bee eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	Serious
2	Chestnutheaded bee eater	<i>Merops leschenaulti</i>	Mild
3	Bluetailed bee eater	<i>Merops philippinus</i>	Mild
4	Black drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	Serious
5	Whitebellied drongo	<i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>	Serious
6	Ashy grey drongo	<i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i>	Mild
7	Common crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	Mild
8	Jungle crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	Mild
9	Jungle babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>	Mild
10	Common babbler	<i>Turdoides caudatus</i>	Mild
11	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Mild
12	Jungle myna	<i>Acridotheres fuscus</i>	Mild
13	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Mild
14	Indian roller	<i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	Mild
15	Indian treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	Mild
16	Paradise flycatcher	<i>Trepsiphone paradisi</i>	Mild
17	Whitebrowed fantail flycatcher	<i>Rhipidura aureola</i>	Mild
18	Whitespotted fantail flycatcher	<i>Rhipidura albicollis</i>	Mild
19	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Mild
20	Crow pheasant	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>	Mild

Of these birds, the bee eaters, drongos and flycatchers catch the bees while in flight. These birds, particularly bee eaters, and flycatchers perch on branches of tall trees and sweep on bees soaring up in the sky. Drongos prefer waiting on lower branches near the colonies. Some birds pick bees from the ground. The common green bee eater is always seen near the colonies in small parties of 5-15 birds. The black drongo is also an important predator of bees. This bird prefers open and cultivated countryside while its whitebellied cousin prefers lightwooded forests and thorny jungles. Both these species pose a threat to commercial apiaries.

Babblers and crows occur in large numbers in the Mettupalayam area, but the damage caused by these birds is very limited because of their ground feeding nature. Mynas also come under this group. Hoopoes and treepies are rarely seen here.

Management of apivorous birds

As far as possible the hives should not be located under tall trees. The ground feeding species could be driven off by manual scaring with drums or can rattling. As a general precaution, it is better to avoid bee keeping in heavily birded areas. Since all the birds, except perhaps crows, come under the wildlife protection act, killing them may result in punishment under the act.



Stopping by the Woods on a Sunday Morning

SALIM ALI *, * This piece was originally written by Dr. Salim Ali in 1930 and was reproduced in the Express Magazine of Nov. 11, 1984.

The island of Salsette, the potential Greater Bombay, is a veritable Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. For the greater part of the year it sleeps under the drab mantle of desiccated grass and dustladen foliage, which is only lifted here and there in patches as the hot weather advances, revealing gorgeous tints of scarlet and orange as the various flowering trees, the silk cotton, the coral and the butea (palas), blossom forth in masses of living flame.

But what a transformation the first few showers of the monsoon bring about. It is as though some magician had, by a pass of his wand, instilled fresh life into every object in the countryside. The grass springs up everywhere, and with it a host of innumerable monsoon weeds, till soon, the whole landscape becomes one great fantasy in green.

Pools and puddles begin to form. The bull frog awakens to the song of spring after his protracted underground slumbers, and his croaking fills the air as he joyfully serenades his lady love. Soon she will lay her eggs in some sequestered pond, where a few days later innumerable multitudes of tadpoles will emerge to carry on the race and save music from extinction.

We shall select some Sunday morning late in August for a jaunt into the exquisite country surrounding the city. The

heaviest blast of the monsoon is blown over, and we may now look forward without undue optimism to fine weather. The air is delightfully cool, the sky thinly overcast; banks of threatening nimbus drift across the heavens resulting only in occasional drizzles which help to subdue the uncomfortable steamy vapour that begins to rise immediately after the sun peeps out of his cloudy veil.

We leave our car by the side of the road, and loading ourselves with haversacks containing some sandwiches, a water bottle, specimen tubes and a camera, we commence the trudge into the interior. Creepers of that magnificent lily, *Gloriosa superba*, aptly named, are growing in every hedge. A few of the flowers are out, though the majority will bloom after a couple of weeks. Every monsoon, this creeper springs into life from the bulbs lying latent underground from the previous session.

The flower itself is a picture of loveliness; yellow, red and green. The delicately shaped tapering leaves terminate in tactile tendrils which readily entwine themselves round any object that comes within their reach. Would that colour photography were easier of attainment! No ordinary photograph can ever hope to do justice to this exquisite flower.

The gloriosa lily is, as it were, part and parcel of the suburban countryside of Bombay in the rains.

Large numbers of a wild gentian are also out in the swampy grass fields now, while clusters of the dazzling red ixora flowers are present on all sides. Everything is calling out to the naturalist; would that this state of loveliness could survive the months to come, of dust and heat and desiccation!

We follow the path leading into the "hinterland", the main object of our ramble this morning being to locate birds' nests. We turn our footsteps towards the hills, on the other side of which lies beautiful Tulsī lake hemmed in by verdure which might rival in magnificence that of any tropical rain forest.

The monsoon is the breeding season par excellence of insectivorous birds, and also of the numerous others who, though when adult, subsist principally on grain, yet require soft food in the nature of juicy grubs and caterpillars to nourish their young in the nest. Owing to the sprouting of fresh grass and vegetation, the caterpillars, which also appear at this time in devastating hordes, find easy sustenance. Thus, it is in birds that Providence has devised the most efficient automatic control agencies. Were it not for the check exercised by man's feathered friends at this crucial period, a time would soon come when not only crops but all vegetation would cease to be. Such is the astounding rate at which insects multiply that no power of man's invention alone would ever be capable of stemming the overwhelming tide of their numbers.

There is warbling and song on every side; courting and nest-building are in progress everywhere, and a few early birds are already catching the worm, that is to say, those who have already undertaken parental cares are now busy feeding their chicks.

Finding a nest in thick cover is by no means a simple matter. There are people who will cover miles of a morning in the most promising-looking country and complain to you later that they did not come upon a single nest; that, as a matter of fact, there were no nests to come upon. Happily, there is a knack in locating birds' nests, and to hope to come upon them accidentally is futile. If this were not so, it would result in a very serious menace to the birds and be a grave impediment to their success in rearing families.

Nests are protected from their enemies either by being built in such secluded spots that without a clue of some sort, no one would think of searching for them there; or they are built of such material and design and with so much cunning and camouflage that to the untrained eye they either become totally invisible or entirely unsuspecting looking objects.

The nest of the purplerumped sunbird, common almost throughout India, affords a case in point. It is a pendulous pouch attached to the tip of an overhanging twig of the *ber* or *babool* tree, seldom more than eight or ten feet from the ground. The material employed in its construction is fine rootlets, and fibres, and the whole thing is so untidily plastered over on the outside with all manner of rubbish - spiders' egg cases, pieces and shreds of pith, bark and paper, strings of

caterpillar borings and droppings, and so on - as to resemble to perfection a mass of rubbish, and least likely to attract the attention of the casual passerby.

The simulation is further heightened by the fact that the entrance to the nest - a round hole near the top of the pearshaped structure, surmounted by a tiny little porch - is always on the inside, i.e., facing the tree, and therefore concealed from the intruder. Such camouflaged nests usually get detected only on account of the movements of their owners, their comings and goings with building material or with food for their young or, otherwise, by their inordinate fussiness.

The trick of locating nests, therefore, lies not so much in traversing miles of likely country as in keeping an ever-watchful eye as you slowly saunter along, and patiently waiting for the birds to give away their secrets of their own accord.

An insignificant little brown and white bird, somewhat smaller than a bulbul, silently slips off a *karonda* bush at our approach, and flies into a neighbouring tree whence the field glasses disclose his apparent anxiety. This behaviour is distinctly suggestive. We walk up to the bush and peer inside. A pleasant surprise is in store.

There, concealed from view by the large green leaves and almost in the centre, is a deep cup made of rootlets and grass, slung hammockwise between the stems of two monsoon plants. It is plastered on the outside with a supply of cobwebs. The cup is so deep that we have to bend right over for a view of the contents. It holds three beautiful roundish eggs, yellow-white in colour, with fine ruddy specks. Having photographed the nest, we withdrawn behind a neighbouring bush and await the return of the unidentified proprietor.

Finding the coast clear, our friend approaches, he is too cautious to fly straight up to the nest. Alighting on the further side of the bush, he hops from twig to twig, peering through the tangle to assure himself that the danger is past. Soon, he comes into full view and in the twinkling of an eye, slips in and is settled on the eggs. Binoculars now disclose his identity.

He, or it may be she, for both sexes are alike and take part in incubation, is the yellow-eyed babbler, a chestnut brown bird with white underparts and a conspicuous white streak over the eye. Close relatives of the well-known "seven sisters", yellow-eyed babblers go about in small parties, searching for insect prey among bushes and under fallen leaves. During this, their bridal season, the males constantly clamber up to the exposed tips of bushes and tussocks of grass, and burst forth into a pleasant little song of several loud and melodious notes.

Leaving the yellow-eye to its parental cares, we proceed on our way. A great commotion set up by a pair of fussy little tailorbirds draws us towards the thick tangle of a large-leaved creeper. The anxious couple hops around us from bush to bush, expressing the deepest concern in a series of alarmed "pit-pit-pit-pits". Their antics lead to a search which is soon rewarded by the revelation of that beautiful little sartorial masterpiece, the tailor's home.

A large pendant leaf is folded round in the shape of a funnel, and neatly stitched with thread of vegetable down along the edges. Within the cone so formed is a regular cup of fibres lined with cotton and down. The nest is fresh but empty, but we soon discover a trio of fluffy chicks, stumpy-tailed little mites, who have obviously just made their debut into the world. They sit huddled together on an adjacent twig, too innocent yet to have learnt anything of the wiles and treacheries of the world, and so, are perfectly fearless and confiding. Unfortunately, the light is far from satisfactory, and we have perforce to resume our tramp without having used the camera.

The tailorbird is one of our three commonest warblers, and certainly the most accomplished nest-builder of them all. The other two are also tiny birds of about the same size with longish, loosely-set tails, and are known as the ashy wren-warbler and the Indian wren-warbler respectively. Both these are also busy with family cares at the present time, and, as a matter of fact, we have not far to go before we alight on a nest of the former.

It is on the farther side of a nullah that lies across our path. We catch a glimpse of the occupant as he takes off from a chunk of the large leafed monsoon weeds now so abundant everywhere. Marking down the spot, we wade across and bend low to have a good look under the leaves. There it is, a structure not unlike the abode of the tailorbird, which, to our delight, contains three tiny, polished, brick red eggs.

The remarkable thing about this nest is that it hangs directly over a used cattle path, on which the hoof marks still show - muddy puddles indicating that cattle have just gone over. Each time an animal passes this way, the nest must be brushed aside and shaken violently. The bird is undoubtedly an optimist; but it has at least the courage of its convictions, and is now well on the way to bringing up a family, mischievous herd boys permitting.

That dainty little fairy waltzer, the fantail flycatcher, whose cheery song and lively movements delight every resident of Bombay fortunate enough to possess a garden, has also turned his fancy to thoughts of love. In a lime tree growing in a semi-deserted garden, barely at a height of four feet from the ground, a marvellous little cone-shaped cup, two inches across, is marked down by following a bird carrying off a caterpillar. It is well plastered on the exterior with that approved cement of bird architects, cobwebs.

Three little baby birds occupy this nest. They are nearly full-fledged and will sally forth into the world in a day or two. Everybody acquainted with the fantail knows what a fury it can become when its nest is in danger. The parents promptly launch a violent attack, pecking at our hats and uttering feverish chucks of irritation, which, no doubt, are far from complimentary language.

The harmony within the fantail household is an object lesson in domestic give-and-take. We are astonished at the way in which three strapping, grown-up, hungry chicks can accommodate themselves amicably in this diminutive

domicile. They are packed so tightly together that two of them have their wings hanging over edges of the nest.

The common iora's nest is a very similar structure to the flycatcher's, with this consistent difference that while in the fantail's nest, strips of grass and rubbish are left dangling below, the iora's is well rounded off at the bottom. Ioras also nest at this time of the year. They usually select a crotch formed by horizontal or vertical twigs, building skillfully around them so as to incorporate the supports into the wall of the nest.

The cup is composed of grass, fine roots and fibres, and here again, cobwebs play an important role in the lacing. In addition to binding the material firmly together, cobwebs serve as an efficient waterproof covering to prevent the water from seeping in through the sides of the nest. When the bird is sitting on its eggs, the plumage of the back is frowzled out and raised to form a dome. The fluffy feathers of the lower back, moreover, overhang the sides of the nest, the tout ensemble forming a most effective protection against the heaviest monsoon shower.

Birds are loath to allow their eggs to get cooled. While we are getting the camera ready to photograph the nest, the sitting bird is alarmed and leaves. Presently, a drizzle intervenes, the hen iora takes up her position on the eggs regardless of our proximity, nevertheless keeping one eye intently on our movements.

Although male bayas (weaver birds) have begun to don their nuptial garb about the time of the rains breaking and quite a number may be seen playing at nest construction, they hardly give serious thought to parental responsibilities till the monsoon is well advanced. Around the end of August, operations begin in earnest and work is in full swing everywhere. Unlike the sunbird, the lion's share of the work appears to devolve on the cocks. The hens make their appearance on the scene only at a later stage. Their arrival invariably causes a great flurry amongst the lovelorn swains, whose strutting, impetuous advances must be quite embarrassing to the fair ones.

It is getting late in the afternoon, and we are a good way off from the car. Our way back lies through patches of open grass-land, where the cattle from the neighbouring village are turned out to graze. Amongst these we find numbers of large white birds with long slender necks and pointed dagger-like bills. They run freely in and out of the animals' feet, darting forward every now and again with lightning rapidity at the insects and grasshoppers disturbed in their progress. These are the cattle egrets, found in attendance on village cattle all over India. They are now in their breeding livery; golden on the neck and the back.

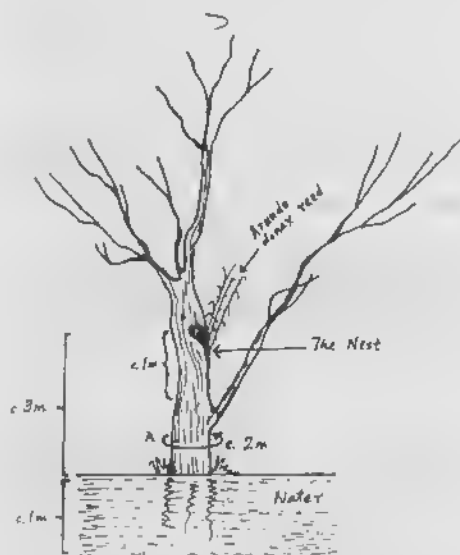
A monsoon ramble through the woods will delight anyone who has the eyes to see and the soul to wonder at the romance and charm of this other world within our world. The electrification of the suburban railways has now thrown the delightful country in the environs of Bombay within comfortable and speedy reach of everybody. To the lover of the out-of-doors, the opportunities are such as might rightly be the envy of the less fortunate dwellers of almost every one of the other large cities in the country. Yet, how few are there who will sacrifice their Sunday morning sleep.

CORRESPONDENCE

A NESTING TREE OF THE COTTON TEAL. ANWARUDDIN CHOUDHURY, Deputy Secretary to the Government of Assam, Cooperation Department, Dispur, Guwahati 781 006, Assam, India

The Nesting behaviour of common birds such as the cotton teal or cotton pigmy goose *Nettapus coromandelianus* are fairly well known. However, a detailed description of a nesting site is always fascinating and valuable.

A nesting tree was examined by me in Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary in Eastern Assam. The site was north of Toralipathar, in Dibrugarh district (the sanctuary falls partly in Dibrugarh and partly in Tinsukia districts). I located the nest on 12 September 1993, following a female teal. It was in a *Salix tetrasperma* (Bhar) tree, partly submerged under a monsoon flood. The details are shown in Figure 1. The nest was in a natural hollow overgrown with *Arundo donax* reeds. I did not try to see the exact material used in the nest to avoid disturbance to the bird(s). The tree was in an open area. The circumference of the tree at "A" (see Fig.1) was 2m.



Bhar *Salix tetrasperma* tree with the nest of cotton teal in Dibru-Saikhowa Sanctuary (illus, author).

SIGHTINGS OF MALLARDS NEAR PUNE. RAHUL PURANDARE, 18A, Kapila Society, Gokhale Nagar, Pune 411 053, India

I must share some information with regard to Mr Asad Rahmani's 'Is the Mallard Spreading in India?'. I have a few records of this bird near Pune. I have seen Mallards at Khamgaon Lake (18°40'N and 74°13'E, Pune dist. Maharashtra) on three occasions. I saw them on 12 January 1987, 19th November 1987 and 30th January 1988, everytime 1 male and 3 females. I guess they were the same birds and might be stray wanderers. I have not seen Mallard anywhere near Pune after that. At many places in the note, Mr Rahmani gives the bird count in terms of number of pairs. It would be worthwhile to know whether he really means 'pairs' or is that term used only to indicate the count. In other words, I want to ask him whether this bird in the north occur in pairs? I would be glad to know his comments on this.

Before I finish, let me congratulate you for becoming the first recipient of the 'Salim Ali International Award for Nature Conservation'. All birdwatchers are happy with this news.



INFORMATION REQUESTED ON RED DATA BOOK SPECIES. AASHEESH PITTIE, 8-2-545 'Prem Parvat', Road No.7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034, India

Readers of the Newsletter are aware that work on the compilation of a Red Data Book for Asia is under way, for which the cut-off date is March 1999. Various persons in India have been entrusted to write up accounts on candidate species. The most important of these compilations will be the current status of these birds. Extracting information from published sources is easy but will be incomplete without inputs on their contemporary status from birdwatchers and ornithologists of India.

I am compiling the species account for the following birds, and I request you to send information on these birds to me at the earliest to the address mentioned above. Every contributor will be credited in the published Red Data Book. I will be able to incorporate your notes into Species Account, if I receive them before the end of January 1998. Your whole-hearted and early cooperation is requested to make the project a success.

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1 Forest Owlet | <i>Athene blewitti</i> |
| 2 Sykes's Crested Lark
(or Tawny lark) | <i>Galerida deva</i> |
| 3 Malabar Crested Lark | <i>Galerida malabarica</i> |
| 4 Broad-Tailed Grass Warbler
(Grassbird) | <i>Schoenicola platyura</i> |
| 5 Brownwinged Kingfisher | <i>Pelargopsis amauropterus</i> |
| 6. Brownbreasted Flycatcher | <i>Muscicapa multui</i> |



NEED TO CONSERVE SMALL ECOLOGICAL PATCHES IN THE COUNTRY AND ITS IMPORTANCE. VISHNUDAS, 'Vishnu Nivas', Karinkutty PO, Kalpetta, Waynad Dist, Kerala 673 121, India

In the Editorial of the last issue (July-August) of the Newsletter, you mentioned the need to conserve small ecological patches in the country and its importance. I think it is a good step towards conservation.

I am living in Wayanad district of Kerala — a hot spot biodiversity area but now facing various types of exploitation particularly for Tourism and unhealthy agricultural practices. In the district there are plenty of Ecological Patches which need to be conserved.

The purpose of this letter is to inform you about my willingness to work with you on the proposed conservation activities. Currently I am a member of the District Paryavaran Vahini (A Brigade for Environment Protection) and am working with an NGO.

But I don't have a clear idea about your plan, so it would be helpful if you could give me further details of the project.



NUMBER OF TREES AND NESTS IN MALDA, WEST BENGAL. ARUNAYAN SHARMA, Green Peoples India, N.S. Road, in front of TOP, Malda 732 101, W.B., India

Thank you very much for accepting both my note and article. You asked me how I came to the conclusion that there are 12,000 + open billed storks. The method is very simple. First I

survey the place and prepare a rough map of the area. Then I begin to count the trees. Most of the nesting trees are inside the fencing area. Initially it was found that there are near about 355 + nesting trees. Each averagely has 9 nests (the lowest number in a tree is 7 and highest is 10).

The nests are generally in Teak (*Tectona grandis*), Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and Eucalyptus trees. Each nest generally has two parents and two chicks (sometimes 3 chicks, 20%, 1 chick 10% of nests). So, in all the number of birds — $355 \times 9 \times 4 = 12,000+$.



OVER WINTERING OF HEN HARRIER (*CIRCUS CYANEUS LINNAEUS*) IN KEOARNATH WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, WESTERN HIMALAYA. R SURESH KUMAR

During my stay at the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary (November 1996 to April 1997) for a study on the winter habitat use by monal pheasant (*Lophophorus impejanus*), I made a few observations on other birds. On 25th November 1996 I saw a harrier flying at an altitude of 3300 m in the southern boundary of the sanctuary (30°30' N and 79°15' E). The vegetation at this altitude was an alpine meadow dominated by *Danthonia cachemyriana*. It was a female harrier with dark brown streaked plumage and white rump patch. A little later I saw a male harrier flying around the same altitude. It was clearly identified as a hen harrier by the darker ashy grey overall plumage, broader black wing tips. They were often seen flying close to the ground, a behaviour typical of harriers. In the alpine meadow, the perennial herbs such as *Anemone rivularis*, *Ranunculus hirtellus* and *Geranium wallichianum*, among others, had withered away and by November the *Danthonia* tussocks were in a dried state and remained so till April. The sanctuary remained snow bound from middle of January to late March. A large number of grasshoppers were seen in the area during this period, which the harriers possibly could have been feeding upon.

Initially I thought that the harriers were migrating but frequent sightings from November 1996 to March 1997 suggested that they were probably residing there. The female was not recorded after mid March, while the male was seen till 28th March 1997, harassed by a pair of jungle crows (*Corvus macrorhynchos*) above an Oak-Rhododendron forest at about an altitude of 3100 m.

Hen harriers are reported to be rather uncommon winter visitors and/or passage migrants to peninsular India (Ali & Ripley 1983). Over wintering of hen harriers have also been reported in the main valleys of Gilgit, Chitral and Potohar plateau around Rawalpindi (Roberts, 1991). Hence, this observation of hen harriers over wintering in the study area could possibly be the first such record within Kedarnath WLS.

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THE BLACK DRONGO, *DICRURUS ADSIMILIS*, A 'POLICEMAN' AMONG BIRDS. E.V. ABDULLA, Department of Zoology, PHSS Perambra, Kozhikode 673 525, Kerala, India

On the morning of 19th December 1996, I was observing the behaviour of a purple moorhen, *Porphyrio porphyrio*, in the

Azhinjilam wetland, Calicut, Kerala, a Brahminy kite, *Haliastur indus*, appeared in the sky. Having circled the sky for a few minutes the bird flew down. Seeing the kite approaching the young ones of the moorhen, growing fledglings of the second brood, stopped feeding and indulged in threatening displays with harsh calls Kreck... Kreck...

When the raptor was about 2 metres away the moorhens intensified their calls and that seemed to be a signal for the flock to close in. Within seconds many birds congregated in the area to defend the young ones. A few in the flock took to their wings to drive out the kite. Overlooking the feeble protests from the rails the kite continued to annoy them. On a sudden, to my surprise, a black drongo, *Dicrurus adsimilis*, flew into the scene and chased the kite which was about 8 times larger in size than the drongo. The drongo pecked twice or thrice at the back of the raptor, and within a few minutes the intruder was driven out of the wetland. This incident convinced me about the validity of the saying 'drongo, a Policeman among birds'.

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THE EUROPEAN BEE-EATER. H DANIEL WESLEY, 126, Ramalinganagar South, Tiruchirapalli 620 017, Tamil Nadu, India.

The report on the sighting of the European bee-eater by Joshua *et al.*, (1997) in the Bhavanisagar area has elicited a rather caustic observation from Lavkumar Khachar (1997).

Nine years ago I received a letter (9 July 1988) from Dr S Thirumurthi of the Agricultural Research Station, Bhavanisagar that he had seen "A batch of seven European bee-eaters (*Merops apiaster*) at Bhavanisagar, requesting me to keep an eye for the bird elsewhere too. Hoffmann (1997) of Ceylon Bird Club reports that since its recorded observation in 1993 in Sri Lanka, the bird is seen annually on the Island.

I have kept a keen wide eye for the bird but have not come across it wherever I happened to travel along the coasts, plains and hills south of Tiruchirapalli in Tamil Nadu. It is not reported to have been observed in the entire south-western India (Daniels, JRJ, 1997). Its occurrence reported from Bhavanisagar is a rather odd distribution. Perhaps it is a straggler to this part of Tamil nadu. The long period of interval between the sightings speaks in support of this view. Dr S Thirumurthi's vague information that he saw the birds "recently here at Bhavanisagar", writing on 9 July 1988, may have been of an event a few months before the date of the epistle.

That it could have been a chestnut-headed bee-eater is likely, for this bird affects the hills of the Western Ghats as evident from reports in the NLBW, Vols. 32(1&2) : 10-12, 33(4) : 62-65; 33(5) : 83-85; 33(6) : 99-103; 34(2) : 22-25; 34(4) : 79-82, 93-94; 35(5) : 86-87; in May 1993 Dr Calvin B De Witt of Ausable Institute of Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison and I came across the bird wherever we went birding in Kodaikanal.

On account of the doubt raised on the identity of the bird reported as *Merops apiaster* and to fix its status, it is but proper that the bird's identity be verified.

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ON REPORTING IN THE NEWSLETTER. H DANIEL WESLEY, 126, Ramalinga Nagar South, Tiruchirappalli, Vayalur Road, Tamil Nadu 620 017

The readers of the Newsletter for Bird Watchers are aware that the contributors of notes and articles to the Newsletter are increasing in number and they are quite free to write what they see of the birds and their environment. It is the encouragement to the contributors that is responsible for the spurt of enthusiasm to look at birds in the wild. Though the newsletter is not a scientific reporter, yet the contributors could help the serious readers by being a little more systematic, in their observation and reporting. For example, bird species are reported as being abundant, common, uncommon and rare. It would be helpful if these terms are quantified and symbolised. Well, there should be a standard to judge by, which could be suggested by a common forum like the BNHS. Or, we could follow what Olin Sewall Pettingill Jr. has suggested for the different frequency rating : 90-100% = Abundant (A); 65-89% = Common (C); 31-64% = Moderately common (MC); 10-30% = Uncommon (UC); 1-9% = Rare (R). Much about the environment and the birds themselves could be gauged from the ratings.



ENDANGERED BIRDS SIGHTED IN POBITORA SANCTUARY. MRIGEN BARUA, Range Forest Officer, Pobitora, GAJAN CH CHETTRI, Fr I, Nagaon, W.L. Divn., and PRASANTA BARDOLOI, Green Guard

During the Asian Waterfowl count conducted in January '97, we sighted a red-necked grebe (*Podiceps griseigena*), white necked stork (*Ciconia episcopus*), black stork (*Ciconia nigra*), white-bellied heron (*Ardea imperialis*) and white ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*). All these species are not listed in the checklist for the sanctuary and also a few more terrestrial birds were also sighted in the sanctuary this year which are not yet listed. All the birds will be included in the new checklist.



BLACKCAPPED KINGFISHER IN PALACE GROUND, BANGALORE. DR A R PAI, 43/44, Cunningham Road, Bangalore 560 052

This is to bring to the attention of fellow bird-watchers in and around Bangalore. I first noticed a black capped kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* towards the end of February or early March this year, soon after a cyclonic storm in Andhra Pradesh. He was first found flitting from tree to tree near the water body in the Bangalore

Palace grounds. He was, presumably, blown in from the Andhra coast at the time of the cyclone.

After disappearing from the scene, he is now visible again at the same place where one can also see white breasted kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*, small blue kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* as well as the pied kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*.



NEWS FROM COORG - A REDWINGED CRESTED CUCKOO, BONNELLI'S EAGLE, SHAHIN FALCON AND PITTAS. Lt. Gen. B CNANDA, Hebbetagiri, K. Nidugane P.O., Madikeri 571 201, Kodagu Dist.

On 3rd Dec'97 we had a very special visitor. A redwinged crested cuckoo *Clamator coromandus* was caught by our cook outside the Kitchen door at 0500 h (5 a.m.).

It was a very misty morning and the electric light outside the kitchen door was on. Perhaps the bird was disoriented by the peculiar glare that a combination of electric light and mist produces.

Before the bird was set free at 0830 h (8.30 a.m.) my cook, wife, daughter and I had a close look at this beautiful bird. I trust the trauma of capture and close scrutiny by humans was overcome once set free.

I understand from all the books available with me that the redwinged crested cuckoo is a rare winter visitor to South India. Perhaps this report will be of interest to some of the readers of NLBW. We are located at approximately 75° 43'E and 12° 27' N.

Where I live I often see raptors, they are magnificent as they glide past or circle high above and utter their haunting call. The crows gangup and harass them while I watch in frustrated anger at the mob proving that it's numbers and not quality that matters. But what angers me most is my inability to positively identify these magnificent creatures in spite of all the description in the various books.

It is therefore with all humility that I report two positive identifications.

28 Aug'97 was a very wet and rainy day, and at about 10 a.m. (1000 h) a wet and bedraggled eagle came and sat on the electric pole that is located about 30 yards from my porch. It gave me sufficient time to get hold of my binoculars and have a close scrutiny. There was nothing bedraggled about this bird from the tarsus below to the neck above, it was pure unadulterated raptor. Without doubt it was a Bonelli's eagle *Hieraetus fasciatus*.

The second was a shahin falcon *Falco peregrinus peregrinator* that flew hardly 20 feet above me at 7.30 a.m. (0730 h) on 31 Aug '97.

There are other raptors in the area and I shall try to identify them.

This is with reference to "Indian Pittas Dying During Migration" by Dr. Anil Pimplapure. Vol. 37, No. 4, July/August 97.

My experience says that pittas seem to have a tendency towards 'smashing into walls'.

The first experience I had was when a pitta smashed onto the wall of my grandfather's house, 'Line Cottage', Madikeri in broad daylight in 1937. (The house still exists). The second was at Convent of St. Joseph Madikeri in 1941. This was also in daylight. The third was in 1977 at the Defence Services Staff College Wellington, Nilgiris. All three happened in my presence and in daytime. It is therefore unlikely that they were dazzled; there must be another explanation, something like the whales heading for the beach.

I have seen pittas on two occasions around my house. One on 29th April 96, the bird allowed my daughter and me to get on close as 10 yards. The second was on 12 Nov. 97. This bird was disturbed by workers cutting gorse fern.



NEWS FROM ENGLAND, ABOUT HOUSE MARTINS.
L.A. HILL, 32 Hillside Drive, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 7EZ, U.K.

"I have a feeling that my trip out to the Coto Donana this last Spring will be my last (my friends say I have been saying that since my first trip in 1987 and that it has become an annual joke).

This Summer I have been continuing with my project of ringing house martins at their breeding colonies, which I started 8 years ago. I usually catch about 450 birds each year, of which around 100 are re-traps from previous years. I always ask these where they passed the previous winter but so far none has replied! The oldest re-trap I have had so far was ringed in 1991 as an adult and caught again this year, so it was at least 6 years old. On looking through my records I saw that I had caught it each year in between at the same house! A female. That was here in my local area. I had another one, a male of the same age, which I caught at a little village in the northern part of Spain this last Spring.

Talking of re-traps and wintering areas, etc., you might be interested in an article which was published last month in *Safring News* which is the *Journal of South African ringers*..."



PROJECT : HAIRCRESTED DRONGO. D. AVINANDAN,
Student Birdwatcher (Senior) and Warden, Bird Preserve, Rishi Valley School, Rishivalley 517 352, AP, India

I am writing in continuation of Mr Aasheesh Pittie's letter on the haircrested drongo's preference for the nectar yield of flowers of the coral tree (*Erythrina indica*). We have some details on this subject gathered during the last 7 years. This species was sighted in large numbers by Dr V Santharam and Mr S Rangaswami during December 1989 to March 1990.

Since then the dates of arrival and departure as well as their numbers have been studied and recorded on a regular basis. During 1990-94 some twenty to thirty birds would arrive during January to February, coinciding with the flowering of the *Citrodora* variety of eucalyptus. We have large numbers of these trees in different parts of the campus. They remain in flower during December-February. The attraction, that these eucalyptus trees had for the haircrested drongos, appeared contrary to the view advanced by some that the eucalyptus as such has no value for birds. We found that the birds have an equally strong attraction towards the flowers of *Spathodea*, during February and March. The birds then switch over to *Erythrin*as, which start producing their brilliantly coloured red flowers during March to May.

We notice one difference between the flowers of *Citrodora* and *Erythrina* apart from the tiny size of eucalyptus flowers in general.

Only the drongos seem to enjoy the nectar of eucalyptus flowers. We have not seen any other bird approaching them. Apart from the spangled drongo, the grey drongo seems to have a preference for it. In the case of *Erythrina* flowers, we have observed a lot of competition, the chief contenders being all species of drongos, mynas, bulbuls, chloropsis and even the crows.

During 1994-95, many of the huge *Citrodoras* were felled as part of a soil moisture conservation plan, though a few were left standing here and there. As we expected, there was a sudden ecological deprivation of nectar, especially for haircrested drongos. During 1995-96 and 1996-97 there was a noticeable drop in the number of haircrested drongos visiting the valley. Against the 30-40 birds, which used to come, we could count only 10-15 and that too immature ones. We are trying to remedy the situation by planting more *Erythrin*as. During the last two years alone we have planted nearly 50 more. They are all fully established and are expected to flower in the coming summer. We hope to have at least a hundred well grown *Erythrin*as all over the campus, in the coming two or three years to remedy the situation.

While writing about *Erythrin*as, I cannot help mentioning about the white-flowering form. We have three of them. We have also seen a few of these in the Dhanvantri Garden in Bangalore. The garden is the brainchild of Mr Yellappa Reddy, retired Special Secretary to the Department of Ecology, Environment and Forests, Government of Karnataka. There is an interesting story about this white flowering *Erythrina*. Sir George Birdwood in his book *Sva* mentions that the white variety of *Erythrina* (*Pangri*) as it is called in the North, was first discovered near the ruined Hindu temple at Chembur (in Bombay, near Trombay) by one Mr Bhaskar, the supervisor of the Victoria Gardens. Sir Birdwood claims that he himself was responsible for planting numerous cuttings from this tree in the Victoria Gardens, Bombay and distributing them widely, even as far as Egypt. He further states that this was the only place in the world where the white variety existed and that it was a "distinct relic of the ancient Buddhists who, as their grove at Lanouly (W.Ghats) shows, were enthusiastic arboriculturists". (Authority: *Some Beautiful Trees*, by E. Blatter and W S Millard, Weldon and Wesley Ltd, London, published for BNHS).

Mr Rangaswami has introduced in the Valley another *Erythrina* species from Belgaum. He found two well-grown trees of this variety of *Erythrina* in full bloom in the heavily wooded campus in which the bungalows of the DIG of Police and the District Commissioner are located. This tree is different from the other *Erythrin*as in that, it is without the many straight, sharp prickles seen in the other varieties. Also its pods are different from those of *E.indica*.

During the summer months of 1993 and 1994 he observed over twenty rufous babblers (*Turdoides subrufus*) frequenting them at intervals of three hours during the day for nectar. Whenever the babblers arrived all the other species of birds like mynas, bulbuls and crows would fly off, some drongos alone braving them. This species has been identified by visiting botanists as *Erythrina subumbrans*, also named *E.lithosperma*. We have no rufous babblers in Rishi Valléy. We expect the trees to flower in a year or two and supplement the nectar available for birds.

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Front Cover : Indian Great Horned Owl (*Bubo bubo*) with young at nest. This huge brown owl, with prominent ear tufts and orange eyes, frequents dense forests, mountain cliffs, ravines and steep rocky terrains. It hunts and controls rodent population. Thus the bird is of great significance to agricultural economy.

Photo by Pankaj Neginhal